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ABSTRACT

The first part of this paper discusses presentations by other symposium participants which addressed different facets of the developmental paths involved in understanding one's own emotional states, the emotional states of others, why one feels what one does, and whether or not one shows these feelings expressively to others. It is the premise of this paper that children's understanding of their emotional experience goes hand in hand with their understanding of social relations. The second part of the paper describes a study of how children conceptualize management of emotional expressiveness as a strategy for influencing interpersonal transactions. Thirty-two middle class children, relatively evenly distributed across grades 2, 5, and 8 and by gender, were interviewed regarding their understanding of how emotional displays would be perceived by others. They also were asked if they thought children their own age and gender were more likely to show their real feelings to their peers or to adults. This question was followed by another asking the reason for their choice. Results indicate that children in this age span of about 7.5 to 13.5 years clearly recognize that emotional-expressive behavior impacts on others, whether it be genuine or dissembled expressive displays. Given such awareness of the communicative significance of emotional displays, they are also able to articulate who is the safer audience for seeing the genuine emotional display. (RH)

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THE UNDERSTANDING OF EMOTION AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF RELATIONSHIPS

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As discussant for this symposium on children's understanding of emotion, I am impressed with the implicit and explicit reference by each participant to children's relations with others as being a crucial component in children's understanding of emotional experience. Emotions allow us to be differentially sensitized to classes of stimuli, and very prominent among these classes of stimuli are other people. Emotional experience not only affects our cognition and vice-versa (e.g., Bower & Cohen, 1982; Lazarus, 1984), it also transforms the relations we have with others (e.g., de Rivera, 1977, among others). The assorted emotions we experience in our relations with others will predict our attraction to or avoidance of others and will directly impact on how and whether we reveal expressively what we feel about others and what we feel about ourselves vis à vis the other. Thus, emotional experience is pivotally involved in self-evaluation as well, for often our collective relations with others are internalized as an audience-mirror to the self.

Emotional states lead to emotional expressions -- although the expressive behavior may not be veridical to the emotional state as in the adoption of display rules or expressive deception -- and therein lies the interpersonal matrix of emotional experience. Our emotional expressions are communicative, and, indeed, in infancy affective expressive behavior is the currency of interpersonal exchange. However, what we show to others about our feelings are acts of self-regulation and self-knowledge,

which traverse developmental paths. The participants in this symposium have addressed different facets of the developmental paths involved in coming to understand one's own emotional states, the emotional states of others, why one feels what one does, and whether one shows these feelings expressively to others.

As discussant I shall extrapolate from the other participants' presentations what I believe are the embedded connections between those aspects of children's understanding of emotional experience that were investigated and children's understanding of social relations. I shall conclude with a brief summary of some recent descriptive data of my own, which are part of a larger study on children's beliefs about the process of emotion management. The present data address the issue of how do children conceptualize management of emotional expressiveness as a strategy for influencing interpersonal transactions.

Discussion of Symposium Presentations

Leslie Brody: While Dr. Brody's paper did not directly address social relationships, her analysis of children's emotion labeling skills has implications for children being able to conceptualize not only their own emotional experience but that of others as well when in similar situations. Dr. Brody's data are also relevant to what children may have access to as conceptual skills when trying to make sense of media portrayals of emotional experience.

I think Dr. Brody's methodology may have created difficulties for the preschoolers, whose performance was hardly better than chance in matching similar emotions across similar situations. But we know from other research (Barden, Zelko, Duncan, & Masters, 1980) that preschoolers are actually rather well informed about what sorts of emotions are likely to

be experienced in what sorts of situations. Certainly Judy Dunn's presentation vividly illustrated that young children definitely act towards others based on their inferences about what the other feels or what they want the other to feel. Developmental trends in ability to discriminate nuances among emotions needs to be further researched, and one way to do so may be to look at the kinds of errors children made in Dr. Brody's task. The errors may reveal an age-related pattern which could provide clues as to what children attend to when they anticipate an emotional response from someone in some particular situation. This intrigues me, because I want to find out how children acquire pre-interaction expectancies and then begin to map their expressive behavior onto how they believe the interaction will unfold (see Ickes, Patterson, Rajecki, & Tanford, 1982).

Jackie Gnepp: Dr. Gnepp's research directly addresses how social knowledge interfaces with the understanding of emotional experience. Her research examined how children come to anticipate atypical emotional responses, based on either the prior emotional experience the individual has had or on the idiosyncratic disposition of the individual. The developmental trends in this inferential process have implications for children's sensitivity to the internal appraisals made by others, with a potential feedback loop to the child's insight into the possiblity that she/he too may have some unique perspectives which lead her/him to experience unexpected (atypical) emotions at times. Learning both to communicate one's own internal appraisal to others and to find out from others their unusual appraisal of some situation when a discrepant emotional response is encountered is an important interpersonal transaction which seems especially important for children's personal

relationships.

Another feature of Dr. Gnepp's work which I want to comment on is her methodological strategy of examining how children use person-specific information, or, for that matter, whether children even think to ask about person-specific information when trying to make sense of someone's unexpected emotional reaction. Her model for how this information-seeking process is embedded in a person's attempts to figure out someone's emotional response appears descriptively valid, but I wonder why even adults do not seek person-specific information more often before presuming to know someone else's emotional experience. Perhaps "emotional egocentrism" is more entrenched than other sorts of restricted perspective-taking.

Judy Dunn. Dr. Dunn's observational work directly examines children's emotional development in the context of relationships with others. What I like very much about Dr. Dunn's research is her tracking how children's behavior changes as they come to understand others' emotions. Thus, by 24 months children differentially respond to their older siblings' conflicts with their mother and appropriately offer support when the sib is distressed. Her data also permit the inference that rather young children (2-year olds) are already impressively competent at understanding family rules and family expression of emotion.

A line that I especially appreciated from one of Dr. Dunn's related publications (1985) is that "changes in the children's emotional expressive behavior [can] be seen as developments in children's negotiating behavior [italics mine] in their interaction with other family members" (p. 491). Certainly her material presented here illustrates this sort of interpersonal negotiation. It is also precisely this connection

of emotional expressive behavior with communication and thus with relationships that is intriguing to me. It is also a connection that has been neglected by developmental psychologists until recently, and yet I would argue it underlies most of attachment and socialization research, among other problem areas.

Paul Harris. Dr. Harris' research on children's comprehension of various facets of emotional experience has been a very important contribution to the field of metacognition as mapped onto emotion understanding. However, this most recent set of data on the "decay" or regression of children's insight into emotional processes when they are under acute health distress raises very interesting questions about why insight may not be especially durable. The comparison sample was made up of boarding school boys, who were also experiencing strong feelings, but showed no "decay" of insight. They were, however, also older than the hospitalized group and had experienced separation from their family due to attending boarding school before. An interesting comparison would be to examine the level of insight in children, who undergo repeated hospitalizations for some chronic condition, thus controlling for some degree of familiarization, analogous to the boarding school boys' experience.

What I would like to encourage further study of is what changes about children's social situations when they experience intense distress and then subsequently show "slippage" in their insight into emotion versus the changes in their social situations which accompany intense distress but with no such slippage. Some possible relationship changes which occurred for the hospitalized children and which may be related to their subsequent regression in insight may include (a) increased dependency on unfamiliar adults, thus contributing to regression; and (b) relatively little social

contact with peers going through a similar experience, thus permitting little social comparison or "reality testing." Certainly the boarding school boys, even at the time of their first experience of attending boarding school, would have had the contact with peers for purposes of comparison and possibly support.

Clearly the presentations here illustrate different ways in which the development of understanding about emotion intersects with children's social experience. Now I would like to turn to some recent descriptive data of mine, which address the issue of how children connect the management of emotional expressive behavior with interpersonal transactions. These data are part of a larger study, which has been described elsewhere (Saarni, 1985).

Summary of Descriptive Results

32 middle class children, relatively evenly distributed by gender and across grades 2, 5, and 8, were interviewed regarding their understanding of how emotional displays would be perceived by others. They were also asked if they thought children their own age and gender were more likely to show their real feelings to their peers or to adults. This question was followed by one asking for their rationale for their choice. The interview responses were coded according to qualitative categories which are described below.

65% of the children thought children would be more likely to show their real feelings to other children; only second grade boys were more likely to believe real feelings would be more often displayed to adults. The children's rationales for their choice of children or adults as targets of genuine affective displays were first coded according to whether they cited (a) avoidance of a negative outcome or having a

negative expection as the basis for their choice, or (b) an expectation of a positive outcome for their choice. 63% of the responses cited negative outcomes or expectations; 37% cited positive expectations.

Four categories of rationales based on negative expectations were derived from the children's responses. The proportional frequency of each category was (in descending frequency): (a) 40%: expectation of derision or teasing from peers; (b) 30%: expectation of a negative emotional reaction from adults, i.e., anger, upsetness, hurt feelings, perception of the child as impolite; (c) 20%: expectation of a coercive power response from adults, i.e., punishment; and (d) 10%: expectation of lack of understanding from adults.

Three categories of positive rationales were derived. The proportional frequency of each of the three categories was: (a) 50%: expectation of being understood by peers or being able to trust peers; (b) 33%: expectation of being listened to and taken seriously by adults; and (c) 17%: expectation of eliciting sympathy or help from adults.

The children were then asked, "what do you think would happen to a child like yourself if she/he always showed to others how she/he really felt on the inside?" Only two of the second graders responded with "I don't know," and one fifth grader said "they just do." The remaining children all were able to speculate about what sort of experience such a youngster might have. Eight categories were derived from the children's responses, excluding the three children mentioned above. In descending order of frequency they were: (a) 22%: they would have more friends and/or would be better liked; (b) 19%: they would be teased, picked on, disliked, perceived as babyish or weird; (c) 14%: they could get into trouble; (d) also 14%: they would be more vulnerable and get their

feelings hurt more; (e) also 14%: they might make others upset, hurt, or mad; (f) 8%: they would elicit more help or concern; (g) also 8%: they would be perceived as more trustworthy or honest; and (h) 3%: they would experience relief at being able to express their real feelings. It should be noted that no second grade children gave responses in categories (d) or (e), which are categories that emphasize emotional interaction.

Finally, the children were asked, "what do you think would happen to a child like yourself if she/he almost never showed her/his real feelings to other people?" Only one second-grade child said "I don't know," and the remaining responses were assigned to eight descriptive categories. In descending order of frequency they were: (a) 23%: they would be disliked, ignored, isolated, and/or have no friends; (b) also 23%: they would be perceived as dishonest, untrustworthy, or unbelievable; (c) 12%: they would not be understood or would be perceived as a "mystery;" (d) also 12%: they would feel sad or mixed up inside, not get any relief from expressing feelings, or get mad at people they were not really mad at; (e) also 12%: they could avoid trouble, being picked on, or they could tolerate teasing; (f) 7%: they would not be helped or get things; (g) also 7%: they would get into trouble; and (h) 2%: they might feel guilty.

Conclusion. Children in this age span of about 7.5 to 13.5 years clearly recognize that emotional-expressive behavior impacts on others, whether it be genuine or dissembled expressive displays. Given such awareness of the communicative significance of emotional displays, they are also able to articulate who is the safer audience for seeing the genuine emotional display. Adults are not overwhelmingly perceived as safe or understanding, rather one's peers tend to be more often selected.

Implied in the children's thinking is the acknowledgement of social control processes: what responses are anticipated from another, followed by how self-presentation is then managed so as to influence the anticipated response from the other. Interestingly, the only noteworthy age difference is that in contrast to the youngest age group, the two older groups did cite emotional transactions around one's own vulnerability or hurting others' feelings as being possible outcomes if one did not regulate one's emotional-expressive behavior. Recursive thinking appears involved here and permits understanding of more complex or subtle relations with others.

While the obvious may not need stating, if grade school children can readily conceptualize and articulate in detail some of the implications of emotional displays for interpersonal relations, then younger children are undoubtedly managing their emotional displays in order to affect their interpersonal relations. While virtually every parent can provide anecdotes for how their toddler exaggerated distress or inhibited (or minimized) some emotion in order to affect some social transaction, psychological research in the emergence and development of social control processes is virtually nil. It is my contention that children's understanding of their emotional experience goes hand in hand with their understanding of social relationships, and the study of one permits the study of the other.

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